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Analysis of the evolution of hybrid warfare present  
in Russian-Ukrainian war (2014- December 2023).

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my family, to my parents Marco and Paulina, mi brother Nicolás, my uncle Jorge and my great grandmother Mercedes, whose support and unconditional love have been a cornerstone in my life and in my path as a professional and human being. Also, it is dedicated to my lifelong Friends, whose support was important in this process of professional growth, and my friends from university, whose affection made this process of city moving a pleasant experience.

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# **Análisis de la evolución del contexto de guerra híbrida presente en el conflicto ruso-ucraniano (2014-diciembre 2023).**

## **Resumen**

Esta investigación analiza la evolución de la guerra híbrida presente en el conflicto ruso-ucraniano desde la anexión de Crimea en 2014 hasta el estancamiento del conflicto en diciembre de 2023. A lo largo de este periodo se dieron varias estrategias que combinaron el uso de fuerzas tradicionales e irregulares con herramientas como operaciones de información, propaganda, presión política y económica, guerra psicológica y terrorismo. Por medio de un enfoque cualitativo y un estudio de caso de carácter longitudinal, este trabajo examina cómo estas estrategias de ataques híbridos se han ido desarrollando por parte de ambos bandos conforme pasaron los años de conflicto y cómo éstas, a medida que aumentaban su complejidad, generaban grandes desafíos al Derecho Internacional y a la credibilidad del sistema internacional liberal. De esta manera este trabajo ejemplifica el fenómeno de la guerra híbrida y permite establecer patrones que serán útiles para la comprensión de futuros conflictos. Estos hallazgos permiten comprender la guerra híbrida no sólo como una técnica militar, sino como una doctrina de conflicto prolongado.

## **Palabras clave**

- Híbrido, Maidán, Kremlin, Operaciones, Humanitario

# **Analysis of the evolution of hybrid warfare present in Russian-Ukrainian war (2014- December 2023).**

## **Abstract**

This investigation analyses the evolution of hybrid warfare in the Russian-Ukrainian war since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the conflict stalemate in December 2023. Throughout this period, there were several warfare strategies that combined traditional and irregular military forces, with other tools such as, information operations, propaganda, political and economic pressure, psychological warfare and terrorism. Through a qualitative approach and a longitudinal case study, this article reviews how these strategies of hybrid lawfare have been developing from both sides throughout the years, and how these strategies have become more complex, becoming a challenge for International Law and for liberal international system's trust. This way, this article illustrates hybrid warfare phenomenon, then it is possible to establish patterns that can be useful to analyze future conflicts. These findings help us to understand hybrid warfare as a large warfare doctrine, and not just as a military technique.

## **Key words**

- Hybrid, Maidan, Kremlin, Operations, Humanitarian

# **Analysis of the evolution of hybrid warfare present in Russian-Ukrainian war (2014- December 2023).**

## **1. Introduction**

Armed conflicts have been an integral part of human history since its beginning. So that these conflicts have evolved in their complexity and capacity for reaching goals throughout the years. At present, warfare is understood in a multimodal way, where it is not only developed in traditional battlefronts, but there are also political, economic, and legal factors and irregular tools and cyber and information operations involved in order to reach victory in the battlefield and at a psychological level. William Lind named these conflicts as fourth-generation warfare. This new generation of conflicts is characterized by the use of technology and a diffuse character where the line between what is military or civil is broken (Haro Ayerve, 2019).

The Russian-Ukrainian war, since its beginning in 2014, has been the best example of this new phenomenon, since the invasion of Crimea was a turning point in what was understood about warfare. Russia, through the support of separatist armies that executed irregular military operations, could challenge what was established at international law, and put the international community in a situation of confusion, due to their inability to counter the Russian actions. All this is present in a Russian doctrine established by General Valery Gerasimov, who pointed out that, within a conflict, military power was not enough, but the systematic use of this means, alongside political, economic and cultural power, and well-planned intelligence tools was (Policante, 2019). Furthermore, it is marked by a weak Ukrainian institutionality, which employed similar strategies to balance a broken political system.

Therefore, this thesis presents a longitudinal analysis of hybrid warfare present in the Russian-Ukrainian war, understanding the evolution of these strategies through the years of conflict. From political tools established at early stages of the war to regular and irregular military actions in Eastern Ukraine and meticulously planned information and propaganda operations in order to build a narrative and to shape mass opinion, as well as its impact to states involved and international community.

The importance of this analysis is shown in the possibility of understand in an exemplary way a relatively new phenomenon, which is hybrid warfare, and the consequences that these types of conflicts might bring to the present and future. Furthermore, important patterns can be found in order to understand future conflicts and challenges of international law to counter these operations within a context of a growing instability in the international system.

### **1.1 Objectives**

#### **1.1.1 General Objective**

- To analyze the Russian-Ukrainian war and its evolution within a context of hybrid warfare present since Crimea War and current conflict.

#### **1.1.2 Specific Objectives**

- To conceptualize different connotations of hybrid warfare.
- To evaluate military and non-military strategies by Kremlin through analysis period.
- To establish a comparison between hybrid warfare means used in Crimea war and current conflict.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

### 1.2.1 Hybrid warfare

Before establishing a clear concept of hybrid warfare, it is important to mention some previous concepts to have a better understanding of the context that encloses this relatively new phenomenon. To start, Rodríguez (2019) notes that a hybrid conflict is the result of the evolution of warfare throughout history, leading to them becoming more complex. This is reflected in what William Lind called fourth-generation warfare, which would be a different type of warfare. Technology might become the principal weapon, and enemies would not be defined in clear battlefronts, but in a diffuse way, where the difference between military and civilians may disappear (Haro Ayerve, 2019).

Thus, within fourth-generation warfare, terminology such as “asymmetric warfare” can be found, which is a concept used to refer to unorthodox warfare tools, tactics, and strategies employed by an army that understands its disadvantage against its opponent in military power. So that this army is not able to use any traditional means (Rubbi, et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Rodríguez (2019) suggests that it is important to understand the asymmetry as a warfare feature instead of a type of war, given that asymmetry can be found in every type of conflict.

Furthermore, Gajate Bajo (2019) notes that asymmetric warfare is composed of various elements, such as the use of irregular means that are prohibited by International Humanitarian Law, including extortions, tortures, and attacks on embassies or urban infrastructure. In addition, the choice of battlefield occurs in places where technological superiority can be nullified. So, frequently, these conflicts occur in highly urban places or remote areas that are difficult to access. All this makes null every single attempt to counter from conventional strategies, given that its schemes are broken. Subsequently, the same author notes that asymmetric warfare can be summarized in counterinsurgency warfare, where a traditional army fights rebel groups with terrorist tendencies (Gajate Bajo, 2019).

On the other hand, hybrid warfare is defined as the use of traditional combat methods alongside other irregular means by non-state actors against more powerful actors, establishing physical and psychological objectives (Bartolome, 2019). Additionally, Teran (2019) suggests that the hybrid warfare approach goes beyond what is established in asymmetric warfare, because hybrid warfare consists of the combination of regular and irregular forces with cyber and information operations and so on. This is why it was important to understand previous terminology such as asymmetric warfare before analyzing hybrid warfare. To go deeper with this term, it can be pointed out that hybrid warfare includes a combination of traditional military actions with irregular means like transnational crimes through other actors that work in an apparently independent way, although they seem to be allied to a state. Also, these strategies include corrupt activities such as misappropriation of funds intended for cyberattacks and misinformation towards the population (Galán, 2018).

The concept of hybrid warfare gained popularity in the academy in 2005, thanks to Frank G. Hoffman and his work called ‘Conflict in the 21st Century, The rise of Hybrid Wars’. This concept sought to understand contemporary wars, whose state actors, despite their military and technological superiority, were not able to subjugate their irregular rivals. United States' war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel's campaign against Hezbollah in 2006 were examples of this concept (Miguel-Gil, 2019).

By 2010, OTAN sought to give a deeper meaning to the concept of hybrid warfare through the ‘Bi-Strategic Command Capstone Concept’. This analysis exposed the ability of some states to use regular and irregular means together in order to reach their goals. These means can be political, social, economic, legal, and military ones (Valle Guerrero, 2022).

However, Peco (2017) suggests that even though the concept of hybrid warfare became a topic in debates about Defense, there was no clear consensus about its consequences, and even in places such as the United States, there was not a clear idea about this concept, which means that its validity was doubtful. Therefore, according to them, the terms “conventional warfare” and “irregular warfare” were useful enough to explain current and future conflicts. In addition, subsequently, the same author notes that before the Ukrainian war, hybrid warfare debates were just a military issue without a solution. Then, when the conflict broke out, in which Russia used conventional and unconventional means, which met all the characteristics of a hybrid conflict, these concepts started to appear in academic and scientific journals more frequently (Peco, 2017).

### 1.2.2 Characteristics of hybrid warfare.

As it was mentioned before, even though the concept of hybrid warfare is relatively new, there have been debates about its range and implications. In addition, through the years, there have been agreements about some features that make hybrid warfare different from other types of warfare.

First, one of the main characteristics of hybrid warfare is the presence of organized crime. According to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), an organized criminal group is a group established by at least three people, which must exist for a certain time and its activities consist in execution of crimes established by the same Convention, with an economic goal. Furthermore, according to the same Convention, a felony is defined as an action or behavior that may be punishable with imprisonment through a sentence of at least four years.

Within a hybrid conflict, these groups operate as a financing source, or they are directly involved in belligerent actions. According to Miguel-Gil (2019), the actors involved in these conflicts tend to turn on terrorist groups for attacks and organized criminal groups as a financing source, even though their goals are completely different.

In addition, the presence of organized crime in hybrid warfare carries new actors. So, criminality is a main factor in the conflict hybridization process, through the presence of new actors in the international security system, actors invited by the states involved (Cajas Matute, 2022). Therefore, according to Piella (2019), the participating actors in these conflicts are the states alongside guerrillas, terrorist groups or private military companies. Also, this 'mercenary' element makes irregular activities more efficient, and states can exempt themselves from responsibility. Furthermore, main belligerent states are able to outsource activities to these groups in a disguised form, through resource supply (Policante, 2019).

On the other hand, the presence of numerous actors in these types of conflicts gives rise to the acknowledgement of hybrid warfare as multimodal. This means that various means and tactics are used simultaneously. These tactics include conventional actions, terrorist attacks, insurgency, cyberattacks, and propaganda (Piella, 2019).

Furthermore, within the technological field, it is important to point out the difference between cyber operations and information operations. Cyber operations have military goals, so that they act freely, seeking to damage the adversary's military assets. And, on the other hand, information operations' main goal is to manipulate mass opinion on a certain topic (Rodríguez, 2019). So, within information operations, mass media like social networks are used to spread propaganda and fake news, and other media, for example RT which is used to spread Russian interests (Galán, 2018). In addition, the objective of the use of the Information and Communications Technology is to strengthen self-image by weakening the adversary's one, and seeking the way to reach people's minds and hearts, triggering a 'psychological warfare' (Miguel-Gil, 2019).

Another feature of hybrid warfare is the place where these types of conflicts used to happen. According to Policante (2019), hybrid conflicts tend to occur in urban areas, unlike traditional warfare which occurs in open and remote areas. Hence, irregular armies find in civilians an important human shield to confuse the attacked state and hinder their capacity to use conventional armies to counterattack the insurgent factions. Also, this might increase the possibility of collateral damage; therefore, this situation allows conflicts to be extended throughout time (Rodriguez, 2019).

It is important to mention that those kinds of means exist due to the disregard of legality and International Humanitarian Law by the actors who promote hybrid warfare and the criminality in which they are involved (Miguel-Gil, 2019).

Finally, another characteristic of hybrid warfare lies in its objectives. Unlike a conventional warfare which looks for the opponent's defeat within a battlefield, hybrid warfare seeks a psychological defeat of the adversary. Thus, hybrid warfare seeks to weaken citizens' trust in state institutions and in the administrative and democratic system. Also, it seeks to persuade opponent and its own citizens about the fall of a political system, weakening of social cohesion, and division within a society (Policante, 2019).

### 1.2.3 Different views of hybrid warfare

#### Chinese view

In 1999, Chinese Army colonels Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui published a book called ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ which gained notoriety at the moment of analyzing hybrid warfare and the Chinese point of view about new conflicts, which will be multipolar and technology will be essential (Luque Juarez, 2019). Within this doctrine, there is a new concept called ‘Three Warfares’, which emphasizes the mutual action between psychological operations, media manipulation and legal maneuvers to influence opponent actions (Cajas Matute, 2022). To go deeper, this same author suggests that military participation will be decreasing, while political, economic, and psychological aspects will strengthen; also, misinformation, lawfare, informative operations and terrorist attacks will have a fundamental role (Cajas Matute, 2022).

Furthermore, the context of conflict hybridization is related to this doctrine, taking into account the fact that these authors point out the evolution of traditional warfare, from a point of opponent’s submission to a context of a ‘structural downfall’ and imposition of self-interest though the impossibility of imposition by the opponent. Additionally, they point out the importance of going beyond the rules, where conditionings between military and non-military are overcome, combining several means to have greater efficiency in combats within military context and beyond it (Luque Juarez, 2019).

#### Russian view

The Russian point of view about hybrid warfare is shown in the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’. Created by the chief of staff of the Russian army, Valery Gerasimov, who suggested that war rules have changed and the value of non-military means to reach political and strategic goals has increased and become more efficient than military means (Cajas Matute, 2022). This means that, in order to reach objectives through a conflict, traditional military and irregular actions and exploitation of indirect allies are not enough, but the comprehensive use of all the elements of state power, like political, diplomatic, economic, sociocultural and intelligence within the legal framework of war (Policante, 2019).

This doctrine was taken and used by the Russian government for the preservation of its national interest in internal and foreign policy, and the example of this is the conflict that led to the annexation of Crimea to Russia in 2014.

### 1.2.4 International Law facing hybrid warfare

As it is known, armed conflicts are regulated by International Humanitarian Law. Salmon (2016) defines IHL as the set of customary norms that seek to solve humanitarian issues generated within an armed conflict through the prohibition of some combat means that attack civil integrity. So, hybrid warfare gets into subject of IHL. Nevertheless, as it was mentioned previously, actors in these types of conflicts repudiate legality and public international law; thus, they act outside the law.

Therefore, Lopez-Jacoiste (2015) suggests that International Court of Justice have already express their opinion during the situation of Nicaragua and Congo. According to the Court, it is clear that there is a violation of principles of no intervention in state internal affairs and prohibition of use of force at the moment a state is involved in training and financing armed groups that operate within another state, even though this is not the only factor to attribute to a state about the activities of these groups.

However, Galán (2018) suggests that even though the right of self-defense at the moment of an armed attack is endorsed by Customary International Law, whether operations from a hybrid opponent do not reach the required level of intensity, or even if they are limited to a threat of force, it will not be possible to use the right of self-defense. In addition, this author explains that, beyond the fact that the principle of self-defense applies in armed attacks perpetrated by non-state actors, according to ICJ, this principle does not apply in situations where the attack is born within the victim state, since the integrity of the other state would be questioned. This creates an opportunity to states, due to the possibility of using intermediary forces to attack; thus, the victim state will not be able to attribute these attacks to the adversary, and they will not be able to apply international armed conflicts law, due to the ease that states have to cover their direct involvement in these combats (Galan, 2018).

On the other hand, other activities done by hybrid warfare actors are misinterpretation and abuse of law in order to reach certain goals. According to Lindez (2019), this can be done in two different ways; the first one consists of the manipulation and disability of international law instruments, to favor self-interest or weaken an opponent. Furthermore, they seek to allege Human Rights violation by the opponent to mass media and international bodies. Moreover, the second way consists of taking advantage of national law to create new laws that allow self-interest and the use of civilian and criminal procedures to generate changes in the adversary.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Russian-Ukrainian war

#### 2.1.1 Background

According to Otalora Sechague (2019), the fall of Soviet Union in 1991 gave birth to the current conflict. Issues such as identity dilemmas and the ideological hole left by USSR affected the new states born from the disintegration of the giant communist bloc. This event caused changes worldwide. The case of Ukraine is the clearest example of this, due to the Russian influence in Ukraine's political system. Also, the division between East and West has caused internal tensions, which have brought sociopolitical, cultural, and identity consequences, which have been happening throughout the post-communist period.

In addition, this same author notes that Ukraine is very important on a geopolitical level, due to its location between two worlds, having a sensitive position between the Western block and the Russian block (Otalora Sechague, 2019).

Ukraine became independent on August 24th, 1991, through its declaration of independence. This document labelled Ukraine as a sovereign state within a context of instability (Paraschnuck, 2018). Nevertheless, according to Marin Marquez (2022), Russia withheld the separation of Ukraine; thus, its independence brought tensions with Russia. Furthermore, this same author suggests that, apart from Ukraine's independence, government elections were at stake there. Cultural differences were a complex issue for pro-independence candidates, since Western Ukraine was marked by pro-Ukraine nationalists and the east was pro-Russian. So, they were opposed to Ukraine's independence (Marin Marquez, 2022).

On the other hand, with regard to Crimea, in 1954, during the Cold War, USSR Secretary-General Nikita Khrushchev gave Crimea to Ukraine. This event became a burden for them, since at the end of World War II, devastation and neglect were part of the region (Zamorano Chavez, 2019).

Later, previous to the fall of USSR, there was a referendum in Crimea about the reconstruction of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as a subject and member of the Soviet Union Treaty. In this referendum, the position in favor won with a 93.26 percent. The reason for this overwhelming victory was the discontent of the population with the creation of Crimea after the abolition of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945, and the subsequent transfer of this area to Ukraine in 1954. Nevertheless, Crimea became part of Ukraine after USSR disintegration in 1991, since Russia and Ukraine became two different countries (Sanchez Ramirez, 2016).

It is important to clarify that Crimea, due to its strategic nature at a geopolitical level, was a fundamental point to debate after Ukraine's independence, being a target of interest for all the parts involved. Also, 70 percent of the population from the area is Russian, while citizens of Ukrainian origin acquired traditions from the Russian population (Marin Marquez, 2022).

After that, according to Zamorano Chavez (2019), Crimea announced its independence in 1992 through the draft of a constitution that allows them to annex themselves to Russia. This constitution was vetoed by Ukrainian authorities. Nevertheless, in 1994 the Parliament voted in favor of restoring its constitution, with various changes. However, Ukraine overrode this constitution once again.

On the other hand, Ukraine continued with a strong Russian influence, since in 1994 the Memorandum on Security Assurances was signed, alongside Ukraine's integration into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This agreement was supported by Russia, which accepted Ukrainian sovereignty on its territory and its self-determination. Therefore, this would guarantee security to Ukraine in front of any threat to its territory and

sovereignty. However, in exchange for this, Ukraine gave around 5,000 nuclear bombs, 220 vehicles, 176 missiles and 44 bomber planes with nuclear capacity (Paraschnuk, 2018).

Later, the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation was signed in 1997 by presidents Leonid Kuchma and Boris Yeltsin. This treaty consisted of Ukraine assuming control of Crimea and Sebastopol, with a rent of an annual value of 100,000 dollars for 20 years to Russia. This means that the Russian army would stay in Sebastopol, while Crimea's sovereignty still would belong to Ukraine (Acosta Betegon, 2020).

Additionally, it is important to note that there was a systematic culture of fraud and corruption in Ukrainian politics, originating from a period of economic crisis, recession, hyperinflation, productivity decrease, and the presence of an oligopoly of resource due to state privatization (Paraschnuk, 2018). These issues brought big social and political effects for a few years, especially in the new century.

Subsequently, after corruption and abuse of power scandals that damaged president Leonid Kuchma's image and management, he decided to contemplate his replacement, who was Viktor Yanukovych, former Ukraine's prime minister with a strong pro-Russia stance (Alba Orjuela, 2016). Thus, according to Tudela (2021), Yanukovych ran as a pro-Russian candidate for presidential elections in 2004, alongside Viktor Yuschenko who had a pro-Western stance (NATO and European Union). Finally, Yanukovych won the elections. However, there were irregularities, violation of electoral law, manipulation, and doubts about electoral fraud in these elections. After a close result in the first round, there was a second one on November 21st, 2004, where Yanukovych won the elections with 49.46 percent, even though polls made by opposition showed a clear victory for Yuschenko, setting off an event called the Orange Revolution (Esteve Balaguer, 2023).

According to Paraschnuk (2018), the Orange Revolution was an event that occurred after the electoral fraud done in the 2004 elections, which resulted in Viktor Yanukovych's victory, went public. Thus, there were big strikes, protests, rallies, and blockades of government buildings such as the Verkhovna Rada, the Council of Ministers, the Electoral Commission Center, and many more, by a large sector of the population alongside other state organizations that flouted any order from authorities. As a result, there were new presidential elections in Ukraine on December 26th, which resulted in the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yuschenko's victory, who, alongside Yulia Tymoshenko's support, became Ukraine's new president, looking to strengthen links between Ukraine and the European Union (Garcia Andres, 2018).

Therefore, in January 2005, Yuschenko took over the presidency within a hostile environment, alongside Yulia Tymoshenko, who became Prime Minister. Nevertheless, this government was never stable, and Tymoshenko was sentenced to prison after allegations of illicit gas businesses by the Parliament, in less than a year of her management (Cue Mancera, 2014).

In addition, according to Paraschnuk (2018), even though the proximity between the new government, the EU and NATO, the allegations of corruption generated a wave of distrust towards Yuschenko, leading to a paradigm shift in the next elections, which resulted in Yanukovych's victory, in an apparently legitimate way.

### 2.1.2 Crimea Crisis (2014)

In 2010, pro-Russia candidate Viktor Yanukovych took over Ukraine's presidency as the winner of the elections. During his term, Yanukovich kept Ukraine close to the European Union, due to strong European pressure. These actions angered Russia, which also put pressure on Yanukovych to retract (Cue Mancera, 2014). Thus, the approach to Russia was president's priority, but the earlier approach of his predecessor to the European Union forced him to keep that proximity to the West (Tognelli, 2019). For example, in 2010, Ukraine and Russia signed and extension of the permanence of Black Sea's Russian fleet in Crimea until 2042. Through this agreement, Russia secured its interest in the Black and Mediterranean Sea; thus, this had a vital role at a strategic level for Russians. This agreement, in exchange for a 30 percent discount on the gas destined for Ukraine (Zamorano Chavez, 2019)

It should be pointed out that, according to Valdes (2022), Putin believed that he could keep a strong control over Ukraine by having Yanukovych as a close ally. However, this relationship could never strengthen. So that, these approaches were marked by a strong tension, reaching a climax between 2013 and 2014 with

events like Euromaidan and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, which gave birth to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In November, 2013, Ukraine was in a tense political situation. On the one hand, a summit was taking place by the members of the European Union in order to sign a trade agreement with Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukraine's government was being pressured by Russia through threats regarding the non-review of the energy agreements in case Ukraine signed the agreement with the EU. So that, Yanukovych sought a trade for his sign in exchange for financial aid to compensate for any damage that the agreement could bring to Ukraine (Rodriguez, 2019). In addition, after a pendulum motion of Ukraine governments, which used to go from Russia to the European Union and vice versa, finally in November 2013, Yanukovych refused to sign the European Union Association Agreement and Customs Union integration agreement, causing a new revolution known as 'Euromaidan' (Esteve Balaguer, 2023). This event made thousands of pro-western Ukrainians get angry with Yanukovych and they rioted in Maidan (the Independence Square) in Kiev, in order to request the president's resignation (Cue Mancera, 2014).

On the other hand, according to Tognelli (2019), it is important to note that the protests were peaceful in the early stages, and they were called 'Euromaidan'. However, after the repression in November 30th, these protests radicalized. Thus, symbolically they became, known as 'Maidan'. They were not protests anymore, but movements. Their intention was not to express disagreement with a policy but to declare Yanukovych and Russia as enemies of Ukraine and its identity. This event gave birth to the Ukraine crisis. Consequently, bloody clashes between police and protesters reached international coverage (Cue Mancera, 2014).

After that, Yanukovych committed to reaching an agreement with Maidan leaders in order to put an end to the riots and to call new elections. It is important to mention that after signing the agreement, Yanukovych escaped to Crimea, and after being missing for a week, the Rada Suprema decided to remove him from office (Valdes, 2022). In this way, according to Acosta Betegon (2020), due to the increase of violence, Yanukovych did not have another option than to escape from Kiev. Also, he was removed by a Parliament which was took over by paramilitary armies that put in a pro-Western government.

Finally, on February 22nd, 2014, Yanukovych, after abandon his place, ran away to Russia, and Euromaidan reached its end. In addition, due to the pressure from citizens, Ukraine's Parliament came back to the 2004 Constitution and chose a transitional government. So that, there were new elections in May, which resulted in Petro Poroshenko's victory (Esteve Balaguer, 2023).

Nevertheless, the situation in Ukraine worsened. According to Ojalora Sechague (2019), the involvement of various actors and their interests produced a military and discursive increase, triggering a civil war in eastern Ukraine. This gave rise to the independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Also, Crimea declared its independence and subsequent annexation to Russia on March 11th, 2014.

It is important to note that the insurrection that took place in Crimea, which was realized mainly by culturally Russian groups, had its trigger in the coup d'état against Yanukovych. Furthermore, this event, which was seen as a success from the European Union at a diplomatic level in the early stages, later it evidenced a readjustment of political actors (Acosta Betegon, 2020).

Tensions increased considerably in the area due to massive clashes between pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine groups and also the massification of protests and riots by the pro-Russia groups, who stormed Kiev institutions, against the new Ukraine's authorities and their decisions (Zamorano Chavez, 2019). So that, after this uprising against Kyiv's authority in Crimea, the Parliament of this area (Supreme Soviet) declared the Crimea Republic's independence on March 6th, 2014. Previously, though a referendum, Crimea's population decided whether they stayed in Ukraine or its potential annexation to Russia (Acosta Betegon, 2020). Annexation to Russia's stance was the clear winner of this referendum with 96.77 percent. Finally, Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin signed the Act of incorporation of Crimea into Russia on March 18th, 2014, even though the referendum was not recognized by the international community (Esteve Balaguer, 2023). It is important to note that, according to Torres (2022), it was evident that Russia was behind this process of annexation, however, within a legitimate referendum recognized by the international community, Crimea's stance would have remained the same.

Finally, it is worth to mention that, according to Fabian (2022), Russia keeps a strong control of the Black Sea by having its naval military base in Crimea. Also, this has a fast access to the Mediterranean Sea and

Israel and Siria's coasts. In addition, Russia could be able to launch their air forces to Iran, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Thus, according to this same author, in case NATO achieves control of Ukraine and Crimea, Russia would lose their hegemony in security. This means that the West would have control of the Black Sea and countries like, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Turkey would act as fundamental actors between NATO and Islamic countries, leaving Russia with a big geopolitical disadvantage (Fabian, 2022).

### 2.1.3 Donbass crisis

Alongside Crimean conflict, during April, there was an increase of violence in Donetsk and Luhansk. Pro-Russia groups took over several government buildings, leading to the proclamation of the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Luhansk (Esteve Balaguer, 2023). Also, it is important to note that, according to Torres (2022), Russian participation was evident since the beginning, even though they denied it. In addition, 700,000 Russian passports were given to local residents who participated in Russian elections. It is important to understand that protesters saw the Crimean independence from Ukraine and its annexation to Russia as a model that could be replicated in Donetsk and Luhansk (Cuneo, 2018).

It is worth to highlight that Kyiv did not fall behind. Defense investment increased to 4 percent of GDP, enhancing its capacities; however, there were still structural conflicts within the Army. Additionally, a new strategy was approved, which looked to recover Crimea and Sebastopol, where the Black Sea's Russian Military Base was located, taking into account that this could trigger a large-scale conflict in response to any attempt to invade this area by Ukraine (Valdes, 2022).

Later, the Minsk Agreements were signed in February, 2015. These agreements seek a ceasefire, the complete resolution of the conflict and the recognition of the autonomy of Donbass, Donetsk, and Luhansk. Nevertheless, this agreement remained a mere formality, since the insurgent groups continued with Russia's support, while the violence kept increasing with the number of victims (Valdes, 2022). According to Cuneo (2018), there were a total of 10,300 civilian and military victims and around 1,600,000 displaced people by 2018.

Nevertheless, the only thing that the Minsk Agreements achieved was the faculty to create new pro-Russia microstates within Ukraine's territory, without the West noticing it. In addition, these microstates acquired a constitutional power that limited any European interest. But, on the other hand, this power allowed Russia to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs, keeping a strong instability in Ukraine, allowing Russia to maintain control in the area though independent armies permitted in those agreements (Tudela, 2021).

Moreover, even though the failure of the Minsk Agreements, Valdes (2022) notes that unlike in 2014, the West has pressured Russia to leave Ukraine alone to exercise their sovereignty this time. Thus, the West's stance has toughened Vladimir Putin's stance, causing an increase in tensions, which have become more dangerous than in the Cold War.

So that, from June 2015 to March 2019, there were serious conflicts within Donetsk and Lugansk. This made NATO take action, launching four battalions to Baltic countries, while Poland did the same thing in 2016 in order to be prepared for any possible Russian attack. Meanwhile, the United States supported these actions, offering military support to Poland in September 2017 and sanctioning 21 people and 9 companies that were directly involved in Ukrainian the war in 2018. In addition, for the first time in the conflict, the US State Department sold antitank weapons to Ukraine, and there were air military exercises done in Eastern Ukraine by the United States, Ukraine, and NATO. Later, Volodimir Zelenskyy was elected Ukraine's president in April 2019. As elected, he reaffirmed his pro-Western stance and looked to end the conflict (Esteve Balaguer, 2023).

Due to the increase of violence in this area, the International Community started to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine. According to Velasquez (2022), an example of these condemnations was the call to Russia from the G-7, a group that Russia used to belong; thus, they were previously called the G-8. Therefore, in 2017 during the G-7 summit in Taormina, Italy. The Ukrainian war was condemned, and Russia was demanded to fulfill what was established in the Minsk Agreements through a release. In addition, in 2018, the G-7 emphasized the condemnations of Russia due to the illegal Crimean annexation, and they ratified their support for Ukraine and its self-determination, urging Russia to fulfill the Minsk Agreements once again during the summit in Charlevoix, Canada. Later, in June 2021, during the summit in Cornwall, UK, Russia was once again urged to end its destabilizing interests in Ukraine and to withdraw

their troops from Crimea and Easter Ukraine in order to relieve tension in these areas, fulfilling the international agreements. However, Russia ignored the international community, and they did not offer a positive response to Ukraine.

According to, Esteve Balaguer (2023), even though there were no advance in the war during 2020, Russia deployed around 100,000 soldiers towards the border with Ukraine, causing a new increase in international tension, since it was the biggest military mobilization since the Crimean conflict. Finally, tensions decreased by announcing a partial withdrawal of the army in June.

Later, Russia submitted a report to the United States by the end of 2021. This report consisted of various demands in order to relieve tension in Ukraine and to avoid the possibility of a bigger conflict. Russia demanded to suspend any military support to Ukraine and any military project in the territories that used to belong to USSR, to remove medium-range missiles in Europe and to stop NATO extension towards the east. Finally, Russia noted that if there was a refusal to comply with their demands, there would be a military answer similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (Valdes, 2022).

Due to the international community's dismay over the tension increase between Russia and Ukraine, there were attempts to arrange meetings in 2022. According to Gomez & Carrera (2023), several meetings were held, such as the meeting between the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergey Lavrov and the US State Secretary, Antony Blinken on January 21st, the meeting between the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz and Joe Biden; and the meeting between French president Emmanuel Macron and Russian president Vladimir Putin, which went viral in social media through a photo of both presidents being distant by a large table. In addition, Ukraine president Volodimir Zelenskyy urged the arrangement of a summit with the participation of Russia, France and Germany. It is important to clarify that no meeting worked. Finally, in February 2022, the current conflict began with the Russian invasion to Ukrainian's territory.

### 2.1.3 Current Ukrainian conflict

On February 21st, 2022, Vladimir Putin officially recognized the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk through an imperialist ceremony, which was televised in Russia. Also, the West was accused of using Ukraine as a weapon to threaten Russia. Three days later, 'a special military operation' was launched in Donbass (Esteve Balaguer, 2023). So that, on February 24th, 2022, Ukraine was invaded by Russia, giving rise to a conflict that shocked the rest of Europe, whose consequences were transcendental. For example, 7 million people had to abandon the country, seeking refuge in other European countries (Fabian, 2022).

During that day, the Russian army crossed the Ukrainian border. Massive bombings occurred in cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv. Chernobyl's nuclear plant was captured. Since Ukraine ordered a military deployment in order to protect and defend its territory. In addition, Ukraine's government asked the international community for help and a condemnation of Russia's actions (Esteve Balaguer, 2023). According to Fabian (2022), Russia was able to take some areas from Ukraine, and the conflict reached very high levels of tension in the Donbass region.

Additionally, this author noted that Putin justified the invasion of Ukraine and assured that Russia's interest consisted in defending separatist regions from Eastern Ukraine from the Ukrainian army, which had Russian citizenship. Likewise, Putin affirmed that anyone who wanted to fight them would suffer serious consequences (Fabian, 2022).

The answer from the West was immediate. According to Esteve Balaguer (2023), the West openly condemned Russia's attacks on Ukraine. The United States and the European Union sanctioned Russia in fundamental sectors like financial and energetic ones. Also, Germany, France, Italy, Canada and the United Kingdom joined in the sanctions, leading to the expulsion of the main Russian banks from the SWIFT system.

However, this did not make a difference in Russian attacks. Since, despite the sanctions to Russia from the United States and the European Union, the invasion resulted in the increase of the ruble's value, securing its stability. Therefore, ruble became so strong that the Russian Central Bank looked for means to weaken it, since it implied a loss in competitiveness in exports (Fabian, 2022).

Beyond this, according to Huanca et al. (2024), the conflict affected the parts involved since soil alterations produced a price rise worldwide in commodities such as oil, natural gas and foods which reached

unconventional prices since Russia and Ukraine are important productors of these commodities. Also, maritime trade stopped operating in Ukrainian ports. Thus, experts warned about a global food crisis that could happen if cereal exports from Ukraine by Russia were still being restricted (Esteve Balaguer, 2023).

Moreover, the Russian army was able to advance until outside of Kyiv. However, Russian attacks were repelled in tough fights after they took over easter and southern territories. Actually, despite the fact that Russia maintained control in easter and southern areas of Ukraine and Crimea, Russia withdrew from the areas conquered in 2022 (Huanca et al., 2024). Since, according to Fabian (2022), the Russian army underestimated Ukrainian military power, which was able to resist Russian attacks. Actually, Russia opted to surround and bomb the desired cities such as Kharkov, since they were not able to enter the cities directly, and even though there were civilian casualties and property damages, this did not represent a knock in Ukrainians' will. And the few victories from Russia could not keep the face in front of the efficiency of Ukraine's army.

In addition, according to Esteve Balaguer (2023), due to the conflict, Ukraine's president Zelenskyy requested the admission of Ukraine to the European Union, alongside the review of the requests by Moldova and Georgia. Also, there was an announcement of a customs control alongside Poland, leading to a proximity with the European Union, known as 'the beginning of a new integration'.

Additionally, this same author notes that Ukraine's president expressly requested the creation of a no-fly zone by NATO, due to the presence of several Russian attacks that justified the creation of this zone, such as the attack towards the mother and child hospital in Mariupol on March 9th, 2022 (Esteve Balaguer, 2023).

It is worth pointing out that, due to this conflict, Sweden and Finland asked to join NATO, breaking their neutral status for the first time in their history. The European security context has transformed due to the war and its consequences cannot be measured until the conflict reach its end. Therefore, according to several experts, the conflict has created a shared perception of insecurity (Instituto Matias Romero, 2023).

Later in the year, according to Gomez and Carrera (2023), there were four referendums in Donetsk and Luhansk in order to incorporate these separatist areas into Rusia. According to pro-Russia news, 99.23 percent of the people voted in favor of the annexation to Russia. Nevertheless, the West and Ukraine rejected these processes, and they called them fraudulent and far removed from international law. In addition, according to the same authors, in November 2022, the Russian army was in southern and eastern Ukraine, while Ukraine's army was able to counterattack and advance towards areas near Kharkov and Kherson.

Finally, by 2023, as it was mentioned before, due to the Ukrainian resistance and the refusal to negotiate from both parts, the war entered a stalemate, in which their highlights remain in the fighting in Easter Ukraine. Nevertheless, a possible ending of the war seems so far away.

### 3. Methods

The methodology of this thesis consists of a qualitative method, which "is defined as term that embraces a series of methods and techniques with an interpretative value that looks to describe, analyze, decode, traduce, and synthetize the meaning of events that occur naturally in some way" (Alvarez-Gayou Jurgenson et al., 2014). Also, this article will be carried out through a case study (Russian-Ukrainian war) and the analysis will be done in a longitudinal way in order to study the evolution of the conflict and its implications.

Taking this into account, the first thing that will be done is the recompilation of information from different sources like scientific papers, doctrinal sources and international treaties in order to have a clear and detailed concept of hybrid warfare and its connotations. In addition, there will be a literature review to explain the current context of Russian-Ukrainian war, which is necessary to understand in the first place.

Additionally, to evaluate the strategies and means used during the conflict, information will be collected from government and security international organizations' reports, worldwide news from traditional media, internet and communication means from Ukraine and Russia, and previous analyses of the conflict in order to analyze the growth of the use of hybrid strategies through all the stages of the conflict.

After data extraction, this data will be analyzed and interpreted, understanding its evolution, finding different patterns of relation between data, and comparing them in order to analyze the growth of the use of hybrid means in modern warfare.

#### 4. Results

First, it is important to mention the Gerasimov doctrine once again. The focus of this theory is on Gerasimov's interest in different strategic elements of current conflicts, such as the use of political, economic, informative, and humanitarian means; the presence of information warfare and special operations like irregular and covered armies; and other irregular means like public protests and more (Calderon, 2020). It is important to emphasize this theory, since it set the tone for Russia's actions in the conflict against Ukraine, and, in summary, Russia used the concept of hybrid warfare as a state policy.

In addition, it is important for Gerasimov to have the presence of a structure of strategic military and political control that carries the army, like international treaties (Calderon, 2020). Thus, the use of political means from Russia has been significant since the beginning of the Crimean conflict and even before that. As it was mentioned before, the ideological proximity between Yanukovych and Russia was a strategic advantage for the Kremlin to press on Ukraine to turn back its path towards the integration with the West, something that they have been looking for years. According to Fabian (2022), during his campaign, Viktor Yanukovych maintained his promise of finalizing the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement, which was in negotiations for years and the Ukrainian population wanted it. However, the situation took a radical turn when Yanukovych became president since he refused to sign the agreement with the European Union, leading to an approach towards Russia, looking to join the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union, giving rise to the revolutions of Euromaidan and Maidan later. Something very important to note at this point is that political means used by Russia also worked as destabilizing tools. As it was mentioned before, one of the characteristics of hybrid warfare is the search for weakening of social cohesion and division within the society (Policante, 2019). Therefore, Maidan was the result of the popular discontent towards the broken promises of a government that promised the people they would fulfill the Ukrainian dream of joining Europe. All of this, with Russia pressing from outside and creating a suitable context to their interests.

However, the use of political means by Russia is also accompanied by another strategic and differential factor for the Kremlin, which is the ethnic and cultural factor. Since the eastern Ukraine was conformed by a Russian-speaking population. And, when the USSR fell down, there were around 25 million Russians. This shaped Russian policy towards their neighbors through their response to the violation of Human Rights of Russians in the area. This allowed 12 million Russians (who were 22 percent of Ukraine's population) to become a golden opportunity for Russia and their interests in Ukraine's internal affairs as allies of Russia (Fabian, 2022). To summarize, the presence of a large part of Russian population in Ukraine opened up a range of strategic opportunities for Russia within a political, diplomatic, military, and informative level.

Taking this into account, Russia took advantage of the apparent vulnerability of the allied population in Ukraine and international law to find a cause to invade Crimea. Thus, Crimea became independent from Ukraine on March 11th, 2014, taking Kosovo's Declaration in 2008 alongside the non-biding opinion from the International Court of Justice as a precedent. Additionally, Crimea and Sevastopol joined in, through the Law of New Federal Treaties on March 18th, 2014. This transition ended in 2015 (Hernandez, 2021).

Later, during the conflict of Donbass, Russia also used political and diplomatic means to further their self interest in Ukraine. It is worth emphasizing that, as it was mentioned before, although Minsk Agreements looked to cease fire and stop the high levels of violence within the conflict, at the end these agreements created the perfect opportunities for achieving autonomy and self-determination in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Therefore, according to Cuneo (2018), the agreements for Russia presented in the roadmap consisted of providing international amnesty in the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and creating laws that provide a differential status to these regions and laws that allow elections to be held, which must be accepted by Kyiv and recognized in Ukraine's Constitution.

The role of Russia during the Crimean war and current war is essential since they have had a clear interference in Ukraine for several decades through a doctrine that suggested the important of the political and diplomatic moves within a conflict prior to military power. Therefore, the political and economic

pressure from Kremlin towards Ukraine in their attempts to approach the West in Yanukovych's government was a differential factor, since this pressure led to a process of destabilization during Euromaidan, which ended up fragmenting a country that was born with a lack of social cohesion, generating a total division between western and eastern Ukraine.

Once Ukraine entered in a context of big instability and constant revolution, Russia found the opportunity to take over Crimea, but this opportunity occurred due to the population of this area, who share cultural, ethnic, and ideological traits with Russia; this population, although they were invaded, opted for become independent from Ukraine, with the possibility of being annexed by Russia, giving a political and diplomatic advantage to the Kremlin, since, as it was mentioned before, despite the international rejection, the declaration of Kosovo worked as a precedent for the Crimean independence.

This political and diplomatic advantage was also evident in the Donbass region through the Minsk Agreements. Through a similar formula, separatist groups found special legal faculties that allowed them to become independent from Ukraine. These faculties were signed and ratified by Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in a failed attempt to end tensions in eastern Ukraine and to secure peace in the long term. Finally, Minsk Agreements gave Russia the biggest prize in 2022, when Donbass became part of Russia through a referendum that, although it was rejected by the West, had a legal and diplomatic backup due to these treaties. Therefore, Gerasimov doctrine achieved significant success.

On the other hand, within the military context, as it was mentioned previously, within hybrid warfare there are conventional armies and irregular groups made up of mercenary groups who carry out activities beyond what is established in International Humanitarian Law. Something that shaped the Crimean conflict and the current war. Russia could use this means due to the pro-Russia population present in eastern Ukraine. These armed groups incorporated people with a pro-Russia ideology into their ranks alongside allied organized criminal groups and former Russian and Chechen militaries with a direct influence of the foreign special forces (Rodriguez, 2019). In addition, according to Zamorano Chavez (2019), Russia took over Crimea with SPETsNAZ units that triggered unrest and a pro-Russia insurgency. These insurgent groups, apparently made up of Ukrainians, carried out a series of operations to take over government facilities, airports, military bases, etc. However, the most remarkable thing about these groups was their high level of training, something that was different from other traditional insurgent groups. This can be related to one of the features of hybrid warfare, which is the delegation of military activities to third parties in order to avoid responsibility and allegations, although at the same time these groups have support from the state, which means they are stronger than a traditional insurgent group.

For example, several irregular forces in Ukraine had medium range SA-11 SAM missiles that were powerful weapons which came from Russia and due to its power, prior instructions were required for those who had these weapons. Therefore, it was not a surprise to deduce about who had given these weapons to the insurgent groups (Rodriguez, 2019).

Additionally, there were other irregular forces during Crimean war. The process of Crimean annexation to Russia was controlled by the 'little green men'. This is the name given to a series of troops with uniforms who did not have any insignia to recognize them and who did a silent and disciplined work (Tudela, 2021). According to Eduarte, et al. (2021), 22 thousand soldiers strengthened the 10 thousand soldiers present in Sevastopol, where there were armed forces with special operations newly established alongside the seventeen secret services.

In addition, within the Crimean war, there was another irregular group called Wagner which, according to Montoya Forero (2022), had one of its founding members and leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Vladimir Putin. Also, according to the same author, Wagner was part of the little green men that settled in Ukraine and participated as a deterrent against Ukrainian authorities that attempted to prevent the annexation of Crimea to Russia. Furthermore, Wagner is considered suspicious in the arrest and elimination of independent groups that were opposed to the annexation of Crimea to Russia (Montoya Forero, 2022).

On the other hand, Russian ethnic irregular groups, who were allied to Kremlin, were the ones to took over Donetsk and Luhansk. These groups worked under the name of 'New Russia' (Tudela, 2021). The violent

actions by these groups occurred mainly in urban places like cities in order to psychologically pressure the population and to put Ukrainian army in a difficult position (Rodriguez, 2019).

Later, during the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, irregular groups had a fundamental role again, especially Wagner. According to Zarate (2024), although there is not a clear record of the beginning of their activities, there is evidence of their participation in the Battle of Bakhmut since August 2022. There, Wagner alongside the Russian army and other pro-Russia groups, fought against the Ukrainian army, and Wagner was the leader of the Russian offensive that was able to take over the city on May 20th, 2023.

Furthermore, Wagner participated in false flag attacks such as the use of bomb vehicles, sabotage of the gas transmission pipeline system to the rest of Europe, and destabilization of the Russian energy grid, attacks that Russia accused Ukraine of perpetrating. Also, during the current conflict, Wagner has been accused of implementing tactics in order to terrorize Ukraine, something that they were accused of during the Syria conflict. These activities included systematic execution of civilians that were previously captured, something similar to the activities they did in Africa and the Middle East (Montoya Forero, 2022).

Finally, Wagner activities continued in Ukraine until its eventual rebellion against Putin in June 2023. There, Prigozhin accused the Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and the General Valery Gerasimov of the premeditated weakening of Wagner and the ineffective management of the conflict (BBC, 2023).

It is worth noting that the use of irregular groups throughout the war has not been an exclusive strategy from Russia since irregular forces have been acting in Ukraine's favor. For example, there is the case of Azov, a group that was established in May 2014 in Mariupol. This group is known for having countered attacks from the People's Republic of Donetsk's militias during the Donbass conflict. Also, Euromaidan accelerated the growth of these groups that looked to defend the east of the country from the pro-Russia militias. This growth made it so that in September 2014, Azov took part in Ukraine's National Guard in order to depoliticize the group (Bilsky et al., 2022).

However, according to the same authors, Azov was not the only irregular group that joined the National Guard. There were other groups such as Misanthropic Division, Dnipro-1, Batkivshchyna Battalion, National Corps, and Tornado Unity, which strengthened the Ukrainian forces and share characteristics like antisemitism, homophobia, racial supremacy, Nazism, and a strong anti-Russian stance (Bilsky et al., 2022).

Later, these groups became a great challenge for the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state. Therefore, in 2015 Ukraine resorted to different means to control these groups, such as the weakening of them, incorporation, and coercion. Finally, the government chose to integrate them into institutions like the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense, despite the consequences that it could bring within the International Community due to the radicality of these groups (Bilsky et al., 2022).

Therefore, Ukraine is not a Nazi state, as it was accused of by Russia; however, since Ukraine is an imperfect democracy, these far-right groups have gained military power throughout the years. This situation affects Russia and Ukraine itself. Also, these battalions are equipped with Western weapons and are considered as national heroes within a context of growth of far-right groups (Busso & Barreto, 2022).

The outsourcing of military actions through insurgent groups is not an exclusive and pioneering tool of the Russian-Ukrainian war. From Russia's point of view, since the beginning, the use of these means was a doctrinal military issue that is necessary to achieve their objectives. This is the reason why, since the Crimean conflict, the presence of pro-Russian battalions was evident, and these groups were supported by a large human capital with the same cultural and ethnic background that eased Russia's actions. From the little green men and independentist battalions in Donbass, to security companies like Wagner, all these groups participated in different activities, highlighting their great tactical capacity and improper resources for a mercenary group, since these groups have the support from the allied state, Russia in this case, a characteristic of hybrid warfare.

In addition, the theory about hybrid warfare suggests another essential feature within the presence of these groups in armed conflicts, and this corresponds to contempt for legality through activities beyond the International Humanitarian Law. This can be evidenced in this conflict through methods and objectives of the irregular forces during the increase of violence in eastern Ukraine. It is worth remembering that several independentist groups in Donbass are accused of directly attacking civilians and urban infrastructure, or

even the participation of Wagner in the systematic execution of Ukrainian people and false flag attacks. All these tactics were carried out with the aim of moral and psychological destabilization of Ukraine.

As can be seen, these systematic attacks on civilians represent a clear violation of human rights and the Geneva Conventions. However, the outsourcing of activities to these groups without an insignia, apart from the ideological one, allows Russia to exonerate from these acts since the defining characteristic of these militias is their voluntary nature. Therefore, the Kremlin will interpret this as a way to put responsibility on these groups due to its independent factor before any criminal investigation.

On the other hand, the focus on pro-Ukraine irregular groups changed particularly since the presence of these groups does not lie only in outsourcing activities, but it also responds to a need to equalize forces against a superior opponent due to the weakness of Ukraine's government institutions. Nevertheless, the fact that these irregular groups joined the army represents a challenge to the legitimacy of Ukraine, as it was mentioned before. The international perception of a fragile Ukrainian rule of law, shaped by the presence of radical groups in its armed forces, would bring serious issues to Ukraine. However, in practice it was not like that. It is worth remembering that the support to Ukraine from the European Union has been clear for decades despite the institutional fragility that this country has been evidencing. Therefore, according to Marsili (2023), it is surprising the political and military support from the European Union to a state shaped by nationalist radical groups. A support expressed through the offer of an agile path to join the EU, despite the reports of cases of violation of human rights against civilians in Donbass perpetrated by members of Azov. For example, according to a report published in 2016 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Azov would have participated in kidnapping, torture, and sexual assaults against Russians during their deployment to Kharkov in December 2014. So that this can reflect the big challenge of International Humanitarian Law in this conflict. Since if we analyze the European Union and the West, we can see that these countries have always watched over the rule of law with solid and democratic institutions, and the support to Ukraine can result in a contradiction to their ideals, even more so when there have been concerns towards countries member of the EU with controversial governments and even the sanctions against Russia for similar activities (beyond the invasion) during the war. Therefore, the big challenge for international law within this conflict lies not only in the fact that military activities are beyond of IHL, but also in the fact that these activities are legitimized in some way by an international community that they say to defend and watch over an international liberal order.

On the other hand, the informative management of the conflict was also a fundamental axis by Russia. From Putin's discourse to the information operations, they were meticulously planned to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine and to erode people's minds in Ukraine and the rest of the world in order to make them support Russia. According to Valle Guerrero (2022), Russian discourse is based in fake news, historical revisionism of the USSR, and the blame constantly falling in Ukraine, which is accused of genocide in Donbass alongside NATO. In this way, Russia has found an apparently legitimate justification for their actions in eastern Ukraine, which according to Putin, are about "defense".

Putin has been keeping current this victimized speech since the beginning of the Crimean war until the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For example, in 2014, Putin pointed out that within people's feelings, Crimea was part of Russia. Also, he pointed out that the Crimean annexation to Ukraine in 1954 was a mistake, justifying the Russian invasion to Crimea (BBC, 2014). Additionally, in 2015 Putin noted that his decision of taking over Crimea was in order to give it back to where it belongs (BBC, 2022).

A few years later, during Russia's attack to Ukraine in February 2022, Putin used the same rhetoric to defend their acts. In this case, he called Ukraine a "failed state" perpetuated by the ineffectiveness of nationalist Ukrainian groups. Later, he pointed out again the "denazification" of Ukraine and the protection of Russian people that were victims of a "genocide" (Valle Guerrero, 2022).

Also, during the signing of the Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia's annexation to Russia agreements, Putin noted the importance of self-determination of nations, alluding to the Charter of the United Nations. In addition, Putin took into account the historical importance of the unity between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting the Russian "resistance" against the "Nazi" movement that shook Ukraine in 2014 (Putin, 2022).

As we can see, Putin discourse about his interest in Ukraine has stood throughout the years. For 8 years, Putin has kept the narrative of the defense of Russian people's interests in Ukraine and their "protection" from "nazi" activities from Ukrainian authorities. And, although there is a strong Russophobia in Ukrainian population that could give Russia a reason to justify their discourse (Cortes, 2023), it is evident that the reason of his discourse was supported by their cultural allies in eastern Ukraine, who have always been supporting Russia.

Nevertheless, it was not enough the discourse for the Kremlin, they also must show "concrete events" in order to appeal to people's hearts and to show a presumed validity of their points. This is when they gave birth to information operations. According to Rodriguez (2019), the internet and social media were used to spread any type of news that reflected the Russian discourse through pro-Russian hackers. This fake news reached several countries, impacting also the minds of American people, just like in Ukraine where this news had an impact in the people of Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea, allying to Russia.

It is worth noting that, according to Merino Guerrero (2024), Russia has an important role in a large part of destabilizing threats perpetrated in democratic Western countries. In addition, Russia does not only look to use people who spread this fake news, but they also use Big Data in order to spread this news in the majority of potential consumers. However, this author suggests that, Russia's objective is to confuse western public opinion instead of looking for their approval. This means that Russia does not look to generate as many lies as possible, but they prefer that truth and lies blur into one another until people lose the interest in discerning and corroborating that information (Merino Guerrero, 2024).

Taking this into account, mass media affiliated to the Kremlin such as Russia Today (RT) have an important role in the spread of this type of news, since misleading headlines to biased information. For example, within the context of Crimean war, the Russian media suggested that Crimea's Prime Minister asked for help to president Putin in order to control the 'abuse' and 'violence' that suffered Crimea's population (RT, 2014). Also, in this article, Ukraine and its allies were labelled as 'the western far-right', a term that has been used many times by the Kremlin to justify their actions and held accountable Ukraine and the West for the conflict. In addition, a year later another article was published by RT in order to summarize the situation in eastern Ukraine. This article noted that the reason behind Yanukovych's refusal to sign the European Union Association Agreement was that it was opposed to Ukrainian interests and those interests were being crushed (RT, 2015). Later, this article pointed out that while the intensity of the protests in eastern Ukraine increased, the government proposed to launch heavy weaponry to attack civil areas in Donetsk and Luhansk. Those operations resulted in multiple deaths and injured civilians due to the combats against the 'self-defense' from this area, where cities like Sloviansk, Odesa and Mariupol suffered all the violence by Ukrainian army (RT, 2015). Throughout the years, similar narratives were evidenced in this media, pointing NATO as the true invader of Ukraine and its interest went beyond the protection of this country (RT, 2021). Even, we can see headlines like "Pentagon admits US weapons attacks against Crimea" (RT, 2024), a headline that looks to leave a clear message about the "interventionist" role of the West against the Russian resistance.

As we can see, Russia Today acts like a spokesman of Russian discourse in the conflict, using biased and incomplete information about the situation in Ukraine to legitimate the Kremlin's discourse. They talk about the violence by the Ukrainian "far-right", but they do not mention anything about irregular armies in eastern Ukraine that are actively supported by the Russian government. In the case of Yanukovych, they talked about a rejection of an agreement that "attacked" Ukraine's interest; however, they never pointed out the diplomatic pressure made by Putin during Yanukovych's presidency that forced him to cancel the signing of the agreement with the European Union. Therefore, it is evident the management of incomplete information from this media in order to adjust to Russia's justifications and the discourse of a resistance against the Western oppressor and the self-defense against the "true invasion".

Another information operation perpetuated by Russia during the Crimean war was, according to Iasiello (2017), the imitation of Ukrainian media for their self-interest. For example, Ukrayinska Pravda was the pro-Russian website that imitated pro-Ukrainian media Ukrains'ka Pravda. Also, the objective of this media was to spread false narratives about the conflict, to negate Russia's presence and to blame the West of attacking Russia's integrity. Later, the same author noted that in this conflict, they found the importance of internet as a tool to carry the information to a manipulable context (Iasiello, 2017).

By 2022, the use of internet was permanent by Russia with more advanced techniques. For example, fake news was spread alongside images and videos as a visual support to increase realism in the story. Another feature is that the news lack of links to other media to corroborate. According to Morejon-Llamas et al., (2022), a wave of misinformation was born in the conflict in February 2022, a wave that caused confusion in the international community and checkers who knew the gravity of the situation since the beginning. This wave of misinformation included the creation of video, photography, and publications lacking of context, this information was made up through war films, video games, and media from previous wars. There were few examples of this in 2022, such as the cases of 'deep fakes' that imitated Zelenskyy, who apparently gave up, a video that caused a lot of panic in Ukraine (Muñoz Franciso, 2022), or the case of Kyiv Ghost, which actually was an older Ukrainian propaganda (Cordero Alonso et al., 2022).

On the other hand, Ukraine also used well-structured information operations in order to counter Russian discourse and to boost their interest. Throughout the years, Ukraine also understood the importance of social media in this information war and since Zelenskyy became president, these tools were used through the employment of images and video.

First, the objectives of information operations and the use of mass media by Ukraine were to generate information messages about the situation in Ukraine to themselves and to refugees in other countries in real time, to share Zelenskyy efforts alongside other western countries and make them support Ukraine at military level, to communicate directly with media through frequent declarations, dialogues with other authorities, and visits to hospitals, and to generate messages of awareness, resistance, and encouragement towards Ukrainian population and international community to follow the war (Olivares et al., 2022).

To create its discourse, Ukraine opted for a reaction propaganda, which proposed that Ukrainians were the saviors and the resistance against Russian invasion, and an affirmation propaganda that looks to raise Zelenskyy's figure through the achievements of Ukraine's government in the conflict (Pineda et al., 2024). Curiously, Ukraine used a similar discourse model from Russia's one, appealing for a fight against 'fascism'. Therefore, according to Camargo Fernandez & Urban Crespo (2022), anti-fascism has been the main element in Putin and Zelenskyy discourse to justify their actions within the war. However, Putin established a Stalinist anti-fascism, while Zelenskyy opted for a more conservative one, similar to Churchill.

To understand this discourse built by Ukraine, we have to understand towards who this discourse is intended for. Since this discourse was always directed towards the West. By establishing a link with Europe, Ukraine planned to legitimate their cause and to generate an interest in Western countries to support them, especially at a military level. Zelenskyy looked to establish a proximity between Ukraine's and Europe's existence. Thus, according to him, Russia wanted to end Ukraine, and whether Ukraine disappears, Europe will disappear too (Moral, 2024).

Finally, another characteristic of the increasing importance of social media in this conflict is the fundamental value that video format acquired for the Ukrainian propaganda. Since this format allowed them to generate a greater space-temporal proximity of a conflict that has been streamed at real time against the traditional media and its pre-established information (Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2023).

It is evident that the informative and propaganda management of the conflict by Russia and Ukraine is the issue that has evolved the most since the beginning of the Crimean war. Russia, although they kept a consistent narrative to justify the invasion to Crimea and the war in February 2022, they went from using traditional media and websites to the continuous use of social media and Big Data in order to reach as many people as they could. Here, it was evident the increase of complexity in the use of these tools. The great necessity of "evidence" their version of the story, triggered the use of montages and altered, and decontextualized images to reach their goals. Thus, the premise of 'seeing is believing' lost its value in this kind of conflicts, since these tools have blurred reality. Therefore, the biggest advance in hybrid warfare is the levels that ICTs have reached, that they do not only work as spokesperson of the parts, but also, they work as audiovisual lies generators, where the line between what is real and what it is not is disappearing, psychologically destabilizing the opponent.

While Ukraine, although the evolution of their information operations was similar to Russia's one, their activities were done with other goals. The massive use of social media was done in a context of building a

discourse of connection between Ukraine and the West, and the rising of Zelenskyy's figure as the leader that carries the Ukrainian resistance against Russia's invasion. In this way, he is the one who was in the middle of a potential attack to Europe from Russia. So that, social media helped Ukraine to portray the conflict in a spontaneous way, with Zelenskyy being present in battlefield, and with more authentic press conferences, unlike traditional ones that were pre-established. These tools were successful, since they made the West to have a real interest in the war, despite its stalemate, and to truly support Ukraine's cause. In addition, the support to Ukraine and Zelenskyy was also done through popular culture, since the featuring of Zelenskyy in magazines such as Vogue and Vanity Fair as the headline was the clear example of this support. Therefore, the objective of these operations was not to destabilize Russia, but to connect the International Community with Ukraine, and from that point to portray Russia as a threat to Ukraine and the West.

Finally, to summarize, it is important to say that hybrid tools are multimodal as it was mentioned earlier. This means that they are connected between them and they work in a harmonious way (although they are not always perfect). Thus, Russia would be able to succeed in the political context, they appeal for the support of eastern Ukraine's population. This same population worked as human capital for military irregular operations, allowing them to outsource activities. While at the same time, there were information operations planned to finalize the process of psychological destabilization of Ukraine. This is why, Ukraine looked for that connection with the West in order to get their support, despite being an instable country that was using the same irregular tools than Russia, but with Western resources, at the same time Western countries were sanctioning Russia. Therefore, we can say that Russian-Ukrainian war portrayed the complexity of present and future wars, its diffuse features with actors and goals and the challenge that it represents to the international community

## 6. Conclusion

Hybrid warfare is the result of the historical evolution that armed conflicts have had throughout the years, portraying a paradigm shift in the way of understanding these conflicts, where military power is not enough, but the combination of this traditional means with the advantage of political, economic and legal factors to defeat the opponent, not only in strength, but at a moral and psychological level. Thus, Russian-Ukrainian war, since Crimean conflict, is possibly the clearest example of these types of armed conflicts.

The evolution of this hybrid conflict has been clear since the Crimean invasion, which was triggered by revolutions of Euromaidan, which were born through the pressure from Russia to avoid the full approach from Ukraine to the West, these political tools acted as a destabilizing phenomenon since the early stages of the conflict. And they ended up being seconded by multilateral treaties like Minsk Agreements, whose only parts that were fulfilled, where the ones who benefited Russia.

The military aspect of this conflict has been shaped by social fragmentation present in Ukraine, where separatist population from the east was an important tool for outsourcing Russian military activities, apart from conventional armies. And, on the other hand, the appearance of Ukrainian insurgent battalions as an alternative against the weak institutionality of Ukrainian state. From little green men to Wagner, and from Azov to themselves joining the Ukrainian army were part of activities beyond the International Law, through kidnapping, extortions, violations, and the systematic executions of civilians and war prisoners throughout the conflict.

The second challenge of international law lies in seeking to ensure the protection of the sovereignty and internal affairs of each state, even if they are not directly involved in a hybrid conflict. Since the most obvious development in a conflict of this type is in the area of information and propaganda. In this conflict, there was a shift from traditional media, which acted as spokespersons for the parties, with biased and incomplete information, to the strong construction of a narrative through social media and Big Data. In addition, they established a more agile way of expressing their cause through photography and video. Unfortunately, advances in technology allowed these operations to reach unprecedented levels. The generation of fake news and montages were tools used systematically during the current conflict, with the aim of massively altering the psychology of the civilian population both in the countries involved and worldwide; and additionally, blurring the truth to the point where the thin red line between what is real and what is not is practically invisible. Curiously, in an age where information is at our fingertips, these operations make it more difficult for us to establish a critical view of the conflict.

Of course, this work has its limitations. One of them is that the conflict is not over, and due to the current stalemate, it is difficult for us to predict what might happen. The only thing that is certain is that it is far from over, and negotiations to find a definitive solution are further away than ever, as we are talking about two sides that are completely divided.

Similarly, another limitation is that the unique nature of this war and its context means that this analysis cannot be directly extrapolated to other current conflicts. However, this analysis provided a better illustration of the phenomenon of hybrid warfare, its implications, and its evolution over the years. Therefore, elements of this conflict can be taken into account in order to analyze other current conflicts.

However, the most important finding of this work is the evident crisis in international law in general and the challenges it faces in front of a faltering liberal international order, whose credibility has been called into question through support for operations that go beyond everything mentioned above. Without a doubt, hybrid warfare is a phenomenon that will continue to evolve, aided by technology and the instability of the international system, so it is clear that future conflicts will develop similar characteristics.

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